

VZCZCXYZ0011
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0895 3441429
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 101429Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7054
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0193

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000895

NOFORN
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [TS](#)

SUBJECT: BEN ALI BACK IN THE SADDLE, BUT SPECULATION ABOUT
HIS HEALTH CONTINUES

REF: A. TUNIS 859 (NOTAL)
[1](#)B. TUNIS 849 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: While speculation about President Ben Ali recently suffering from a serious illness seems to have been farfetched, we have confirmation that he traveled to Germany for medical treatment. Since December 1, Ben Ali has apparently been keeping a normal schedule including at least two public appearances. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Following a late November illness that prompted the cancellation of a state visit by King Juan Carlos (ref A), which set off of new round of rumors (some hysterical) about long-term illness or even his imminent demise, Ben Ali appears to be fully "back in the saddle" as of mid-December, maintaining a regular tempo of public appearances.

[1](#)3. (C) The President marked "National Solidarity Day" on December 9 by visiting the working class Tunis neighborhood of Sidi Hassine, walking around the area and dropping by a youth center and vocational training facilities. Photos posted on the presidency's website conveyed the image of an alert and engaged President taking an active interest in the welfare of his people. The President's first public appearance after his prescribed five days of rest was on December 1, when he delivered an address opening a conference co-sponsored by the World Bank and the ISESCO, the OIC's cultural arm, on developing knowledge-based economies. Ben Ali has also recently been photographed receiving various government officials in his office.

[1](#)4. (C) The President's health nonetheless remains a constant staple for gossip and speculation (generally lacking hard evidence) in the cafes and salons of Tunis. Many of our Tunisian interlocutors, both elites and working class, seem convinced the President regularly receives treatment in Europe for a grave illness. Presidential health watching is also, naturally, a popular sport among Tunis' foreign diplomatic corps. While the Ambassador and Pol-Econ Couns, who both observed Ben Ali at close range during a November 19 credentialing ceremony (ref B), felt Ben Ali showed no outward signs of illness, some diplomats who attended the event tell us they thought the President appeared stiff and weak. (Note: Neither we nor our diplomatic colleagues have had medical training. End note.)

[1](#)5. (C/NF) Essentially confirming rumors that Ben Ali traveled to Europe in late November for medical treatment, a well-placed source in a position to know confirmed to us that Ben Ali did indeed receive medical treatment in Germany shortly after the November 23 announcement that he would take five days off. However, the source stressed an impression that the treatment was routine and precautionary rather than of an urgent nature.

¶6. (C) We expect intense scrutiny and speculation about President Ben Ali's health will continue.

GRAY